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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, S/CT, DS
WHITE HOUSE FOR HOMELAND SECURITY ADVISOR TOWNSEND

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SUBJECT: BAHRAINIS PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE REGIONAL TERRORIST
THREAT

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Bahraini media have covered the threat of regional terrorism in an unusually direct way following recent incidents in Kuwait and Oman and the Saudi counter-terrorism conference. The Interior Minister visited Kuwait February 6 and stated publicly that countries must work together to eradicate terrorism before it poses a threat to Gulf national security. The Defense Minister in a February 4 interview recognized that no place is immune from terrorism, which has "no nation, color, or creed." The CT conference in Riyadh attracted daily, front-page coverage, in particular Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's proposal to establish an international institution for combating terrorism. Prominent politicians and activists interviewed by Al Wasat newspaper asserted that terrorism is incompatible with Islam and many expressed support for new laws to combat terror. While Bahraini officials often speak privately about the dangers of terrorism, they have not generally offered the same candor in public comments. This shift may demonstrate their belated recognition that Bahrain is no different from other countries and could experience a future attack. End Summary.

Interior Minister Visits Kuwait

2. (SBU) The coincidence in timing of the Omani roundup of extremists, clashes between Kuwaiti authorities and armed terrorists (in which a Bahraini student was killed, among other casualties), and the February 5-8 Saudi counter-terrorism conference has led to an unusual amount of press coverage of and public commentary on the regional terrorist threat. The press prominently covered Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid bin Abdulla Al Khalifa's February 6 visit to Kuwait in the immediate aftermath of the incidents there. He said that he visited to express solidarity with Kuwait and noted that he would discuss boosting security cooperation in the fight against terrorism. He continued, "We must all work to eradicate this danger before it spreads and grows in a way that harms the people and poses a threat to Gulf national security." He declared Bahrain's support for all measures "to eradicate these criminal actions and to confront jointly and firmly any attempt to undermine security and stability in our peaceful region."

Defense Minister Cites Terrorism Danger

3. (SBU) Defense Minister General Shaikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al Khalifa addressed the issue in his February 4 interview with Al Ayam and the Bahrain Tribune on the anniversary of the founding of the Bahrain Defense Force. He recognized that other regional countries, specifically Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, have been harmed by terrorism, and stated, "Of course, no country can claim that it is immune from attacks, no matter how big or strong it is, and the last few years are a sad reminder of this terrible truth. Terror has no nation, color, or creed." He asserted, "We have unequivocally condemned the attacks in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, just like we condemn terrorist attacks wherever they take place. We regret the terrible attacks in Kuwait, and we hope that they will be over soon so that people in Kuwait can feel safe."

Prominent Coverage of Saudi CT Conference

4. (SBU) The February 5-8 counter-terrorism conference in Saudi Arabia was given daily front-page coverage. Several newspapers printed a full color photograph of Homeland Security Advisor Townsend shaking hands with Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. The Saudi proposal to establish an

international institution for combating terrorism was widely praised, and the Bahraini Cabinet formally supported the proposal in a February 6 decision. Attention on the Saudi suggestion swamped a Bahraini idea floated February 5 by Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid during his visit to Kuwait, when he called for the establishment of specialized national centers to confront terrorism in the GCC states. (See septel on the Ambassador's meeting with Shaikh Rashid.)

"Terror Incompatible with Islam"

15. (SBU) On February 7, independent newspaper Al Wasat published interviews with eight members of Parliament and political society leaders on the subject of terror incidents in the Gulf. All condemned terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, with many adding that the terrorists violated the teachings of Islam. Council of Representatives (COR) member Dr. Saadi Mohammed, from the Minbar Islamic bloc, said that "such deviant acts are incompatible with the teachings and very spirit of Islam." Independent Salafi COR MP Jassim Al Saeedi said, "I lay the blame on and reprimand all those who affiliate themselves with Islam then kill and terrify innocent people." He denied that Salafi teachings provide a fertile environment for extremists, saying, "Since my introduction to Salafi teachings, I have yet to see or hear from Salafi scholars anything that encourages fanaticism or extremism; on the contrary, they preach tolerance." He stated that terrorism comes from sources outside of Salafi teachings. Shura Council member Mansour Al Arrayed said, "We must prove to the world that Islam is a religion that encourages tolerance, moderation, and strongly denounces violence."

16. (SBU) Those participating in the interviews addressed possible responses to the specter of terrorism in the Gulf region. Al Arrayed proposed that the GCC countries develop a joint initiative to combat terrorism. President of Al Wifaq National Islamic Society Shaikh Ali Salman urged governments to deal with the roots of terror through implementation of reform programs, and not focus solely on a security response. Member of the National Democratic Action Society Radhi Al Mousawi asserted that the solution to political frustration is more democracy. He said that governments should confront social problems such as poverty, unemployment, low wages, and corruption.

New Laws to Address Terror

17. (SBU) COR MP Farid Ghazi supports new legislation designed specifically to combat terrorism, but urged that such laws must preserve human rights and dignity. COR MP Yousef Zainal said that precautionary measures must be taken to avert possible negative effects of anti-terror laws on innocent civilians. Salafi MP Al Saeedi said that he supports expediting the enactment of new laws to combat terror and prevent the creation of new cells, but cautions that they be in accordance with Islamic Sharia law.

18. (SBU) On February 9, widely read Al Wasat columnist Abbas Busafwan wrote in his regular column that "it is a mistake to say that Bahrainis are different and that Bahrain is far from any terrorist attack. If terrorist attacks occurred in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and a fundamentalist group was captured in Oman, why do we distance Bahrain from any potential attack?" He adds, "We cannot rule out the possibility of terrorist attacks or sleeping terrorist cells in Bahrain."

Comment

19. (S) In a case of unusual candor, prominent Bahraini officials, parliamentarians, activists, and journalists are publicly acknowledging the possibility of terrorist attacks occurring inside Bahrain. We often have heard this sentiment in private, but the rash of incidents in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman have prompted influential Bahrainis to speak more openly about an event possibly happening in Bahrain. With regard to dealing with its own local extremists, the GOB continues to provide tight surveillance of the four terror suspects charged with conspiracy to carry out terrorist attacks. In a possibly related development, the media reported this week that the Cabinet is reviewing the draft counter-terrorism law in preparation for passing it to Parliament.

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